


LAELAPS

BY BRIAN SWITEK

TV Review: National Geographic's Big Cat Week

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Our relationship with big cats is paradoxical. Leopards, lions, tigers, cougars – they all exemplify a lithe, deadly form of beauty that has transfixed our species from the time Pleistocene artisans immortalized their shapes [in stone](#) and ochre. They are both totems and terrors. Big cats are used to sell everything from gasoline to breakfast cereal, and an innumerable number of sports teams have chosen large felids for their mascots, yet the thought of catching that glint of eyeshine in the dark just before the fatal pounce is enough to send shivers down our spine. We value them for their majesty, just so long as that majesty is preserved somewhere far off where it cannot harm us.*

National Geographic WILD's "[Big Cat Week](#)" – which kicks off tonight at 9PM – is a six-part homage to our strange relationship with big cats. It is not a cohesive, unified series like the company's recent epic "[Great Migrations](#)", but instead offers several different perspectives of Africa's lions and leopards. As such, the week's program ends up being something of a mixed bag – both refreshing and frustrating.

I might as well deliver the bad news first. *Leopard Queen*, one of four new programs slated to debut this week, perfectly represents what happens when the want of an exciting narrative overtakes the desire for authenticity. Set in South Africa, the film tells the story of a female leopard named Manana and her long-time filmographer John Varty (referred to as "JV" for most of the show). Similar biographical programs about individual big cats have been made before – such as the excellent [Eye of the Leopard](#), which will

also air this week – but *Leopard Queen* differs from most others I have seen in the slapdash manner in which it was edited.

As the narrator tells the story of Manana, footage of different leopards in various situations (including Manana herself) are spliced together to tell her story. I do not doubt that the events said to have transpired actually occurred, but any sharp-eyed viewer will be able to tell that multiple scenes were sewn together from footage taken at widely different times. It is relatively easy to spot the grainy film from the 1970's when it is juxtaposed with brighter, crisper scenes captured more recently. Even worse, during one instance a leopard is shown killing a female impala and dragging it up a tree, but when lions muscle in and steal the carcass the impala suddenly turns into a male with an impressive set of horns. I don't see any good reason for piecing together events this way, nor do I see the point in showing JV attempt to lay down in close proximity to the leopard. Especially post-[Timothy Treadwell](#), it is discouraging to see National Geographic feature a program where a human shows off what they perceive as a close relationship with a wild animal when that animal looks positively miffed about being approached so closely. Let wild animals stay wild.

The rest of Big Cat week fares much better. The premiere program – *Big Cat Odyssey* – follows two of my favorite wildlife filmmakers as they track the peculiar lion prides of Botswana's [Okavango Delta](#). As introduced to us by veteran big cat documentarians [Dereck and Beverly Joubert](#), the Okavango is an almost magical place. A true delta, but one which empties far from the nearest coast, this great inland marsh is the setting for animal behaviors rarely seen elsewhere. By following the Jouberts in their efforts to record the animals of the Okavango on film we gain an appreciation for nature, the difficulties in filming the animals, and the threats Africa's big cats are facing. Their narration is a bit laconic at times, but their primary message is dire. Given the frequency with which we see lions and leopards on television and in zoos it would seem that these animals had a permanent place in our world, but the truth is that these cats have only a tenuous hold on the landscape. While we watch the big cats from the safety of zoo exhibits and our living rooms, hunting, poaching, habitat loss, and other human-generated vectors of destruction are slowly strangling the last remaining populations of these cats.

Wednesday night's program, *Lion Warriors* (see the above clip), picks up this thread in a unique way which underscores the uncertain future of Africa's big cats. Wildlife documentaries often present animals from such a close-up and narrow perspective that we don't realize how close and pervasive the surrounding human presence is. Lions and leopards are rulers of the truly wild parts of Africa, right? Not really. *Lion Warriors* documents the tension felt between one group of Kenya's [Maasai](#) people and the country's dwindling lion population.

Hunting and successfully slaying a lion is an important rite of passage for young Maasai men, and brutal retaliation against lions which kill Maasai livestock is common, but this has been going on so long that the last few lions are being threatened with extirpation. Something has to change, but how can we ensure the survival of the Maasai, their cultural traditions, and the lions themselves? The subtlety of this documentary was what struck me most. Young Maasai men in traditional garb, boasting about what they are going to do to a lion which attacked some livestock overnight, spread the latest gossip over their cell phones. Ancient cultural traditions, modern technology, and conservation interests are all intersecting and mapping the future of the world's most iconic cat. *Lion Warriors* is easily the best program of Big Cat Week.

The week's other new program, *Lions on the Edge*, is not particularly memorable. While superior to *Leopard Queen*, this story about lions in Tanzania's Ruaha National Park is just no match for the classic Joubert film [Relentless Enemies](#) (also due to air this week). Aside from the heart-wrenching subplot of a cub who has his hip broken during an attack on a water buffalo, there is not very much that is unique about this film. After a week's worth of seeing lions take down water buffalo, it gets a little repetitive.

Which also brings up one of my recommendations for next year's Big Cat Week. Lions are fascinating, and I adore leopards, but I was hoping that the series would travel further afield. The snow leopards of the Himalayas, the cougars of Patagonia, the Amur tigers of Siberia, and the leopards which stalk the Mumbai slums all deserve to have their stories told, as well. Perhaps, in years to come, these cats will receive their due.

What will become of big cats? There can be no certainty, but our intervention will be crucial to their survival. Despite what we might believe while watching a lion chase a buffalo through an Okavango swamp or a leopard haul an antelope high into a tree, the idea of a pristine, unspoiled, and safe wilderness is an illusion. As much as we might revere cats, we have also played a critical role in their decline (not to mention that of other species). If they are to survive as more than memories we must pursue an active role in their protection. Admittedly there is little that viewers at home can do about this. To their credit, National Geographic has set up [a donation page](#) which allows viewers to donate to lion conservation, but the people whose lives are most closely tied to those of the remaining big cats probably don't get National Geographic or have television sets. The world's latest mass extinction continues apace, and I sincerely hope that Big Cat Week is the sign of a turning tide and not an early memorial to some of the most magnificent predators to have ever evolved.

Big Cat Week begins tonight on the National Geographic WILD. Details can be found [here](#).

*(Those who would like to explore the depths of our strange association with big cats would do well to read David Quammen's [Monster of God](#), David Baron's [The Beast in the Garden](#), and John Vaillant's [The Tiger](#).)

Top image: An Amur leopard (*Panthera pardus orientalis*) on exhibit at the Philadelphia Zoo. Photo by author.

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